

MRS. ESSINGTON'S DIPLOMACY

By
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MRS. ESSINGTON looked up with frank interest.

"And you are going?" she murmured. Her husband for a moment was embarrassed.

"I—if you don't mind," he hesitated.

"I—mind?" she wondered. "I'm delighted that the card club no longer bores you. You were growing tired of the meetings when we went out so much before my tyrant arrived." She glanced at the baby sleeping in the small bed. "Mrs. Pritton was very eager to have you. Did she say it was to make out a bridge table?"

"Not exactly." Pique contended in his tone with a certain satisfaction. "She called me up again this afternoon, to ask if I would go around for Mrs. Willingham. Willingham's out of town, you know."

"Is he?" Mrs. Essington's voice was non-committal.

"So," her husband continued, "if you won't be lonely—"

"Oh, I'll be quite comfortable. What are you looking for?"

"Another tie—this," flinging it far from him, "is the third—"

"Wait a moment—they are in this box. Let me tie it for you. I've tied them for Ted times out of number! He was very particular."

Ted was Mrs. Essington's brother.

"He doesn't seem so very much so now! I saw him with one slipped under his right ear the other day."

"Oh, well, this was before he was married—you know, when he was going to see Lusie."

"I think"—Essington commenced twitching his fourth tie into position with a sigh of satisfaction—"that it's a positive insult to a man's wife when he stops being particular about his appearance. It's a reflection on her!"

"Certainly," Mrs. Essington agreed brightly, "it's a man's duty, just as it's his wife's, to make the best of things at all times."

It couldn't have been said by her enemies—if she had possessed any—that Mrs. Essington hadn't made the best of things. She was charming, and she had even made the most of that, for her attraction was greatest in the way she made herself attractive; intelligence, grace, sympathy were perfectly fused into a harmonious and perfectly poised personality.

No one had ever recognized this more completely than Essington to whom she continued to illustrate—to paraphrase a perfect line—

And the charm of all the muses finely flowering in a lovely self.

Not that Essington was poetic; he was sober prose, but he depended on his wife's furnishing the rhythm of daily life, and he hadn't, in their three years together, depended in vain.

Other men less fortunate than he offered the Essington ménage to their wives as an object lesson of the much to be achieved with a little, and the wives, strange to say, didn't resent it in their manner to Mrs. Essington. For she was never superior! Superiority being that unforgivable crime from one woman to another. She shared the virtue of a frank friendliness, and all were free—if they could—to imitate the simplicity of her charming home. Her sitting-room, to the casual eye, was luxurious and exquisite—a setting to which her personality seemed to have its natural relevance. And yet any of the Mountview wives could have analyzed its component parts: four pale green walls French-windowed to a lawn of darker green; wicker chairs with numberless cushions; an open piano; books of her own without the library stamps which ornamented the usual literature of the suburbanites; a few water-colors—"Done by hand?" one of her neighbors had questioned once—and a great many ferns.

Only one extravagance—the piano. She didn't play herself, and Mountview could scarcely understand a fondness for music that kept her ready to receive a fugitive pleasure from musical friends.

But when the baby came! Mountview, lost hitherto in friendly but envious wonder, drew its breath deeply, as if to say, "Now we will see!" It had seemed to her easy before—however hard to them!—to keep house beautifully, to cook, if need be, perfectly, to be a charming hostess and a desired guest. But now! They had their trials; they had dropped out of functions they had cared for, because babies were not to be left to themselves, and the vexation of the servant problem had all the fuller freedom, the more imperious weight common to suburban colonies. If one possessed the doubtful luxury of a nursemaid, it was only for the hours of daylight; they all demanded, with trade-union avidity, freedom for their evenings. The two things for which the elect of Mountview really cared were night-blooming affairs: the young married people's whist clubs and the literary society.

Whist was played with all the science of their souls, and they pursued literature with a seriousness that had its humor to the trivial-minded outsider.

The two clubs met on the same day of alternate weeks, and were entertained in alphabetic rotation, and the method of the special Mrs. So and So in the matter of entertainment was carefully noted by the other members—as one general studies the tactics of a rival commander.

No one had ever equaled Mrs. Essington; they knew it, even if they didn't acknowledge it. Her chafing-dish suppers, where savory things beloved of men were compounded, were unavailing copied by other women. The cozy warmth and appetizing daintiness she achieved in winter had its replacement in summer in the cool rooms where one was sure of mellow lights, frosted glasses, and an easing to smooth content of the jarring burden of heated days. All this had been the rule, but Mrs. Essington, with an armful of belaced and embroidered babyhood, must at last, of necessity, drop the scepter.

Her friends kissed the baby and exclaimed over its clothes—to sew exquisitely was another accomplishment to Mrs. Essington's credit—and told her how the score stood at the last meeting of the whist club, and of the paper on "The Ethical Value of Shelley," which had increased Mrs. Van Pelsen's prestige in the flattering fashion usually accorded to Mrs. Essington's papers alone.

"The last meeting was enthusiastic, my dear," one visitor exclaimed. "Mrs. Davidson was a little—just

She opened her big brown eyes. "Mind? Not a bit, dear. Have a good time."

"And you won't be lonely?"

"Oh, if I get tired of sewing, I'm provisioned!" She held up Shaw's latest contribution to the irresponsibility of nations.

He carried away this impression of her smiling content and it recurred during the evening. Mrs. Willingham's brightness was hard and her laughter a trifle high. It was pleasant, but he missed some element of spontaneity.

Yet the next time the club met he went again, and Mrs. Essington, after the door closed behind him, dropped her needlework and sat looking into the fire. She was not lonely; she was not angry, but she was thoughtful.

The next afternoon Mrs. Willingham rang up.

"Did Mr. Essington tell you of our lovely game? He's a charming partner!"

"Isn't he!" Mrs. Essington was cordial. "I'm glad you had a nice game."

"And we are so sorry," Mrs. Willingham purred,

since I've had a game of bridge, and it would be pleasant to meet everybody again."

"You mean you'd go without me?"

She forbore the obvious retort.

"It won't be half as nice as if you were going."

"And you mean that I must take care of the boy?"

She laughed frankly at his thunderstruck expression.

"There'd be no care to take, dear. Baby is a love. You know he sleeps nearly all night without waking, once he's tucked away, and"—with a malicious little smile—"I was very comfortable with my books and my sewing—the nights you were away."

Clearly Essington could make out no case. The ground had been cut from under his feet by his own initiative, but he made his struggle like a trout that with the hook in his mouth still fights for liberty.

"I thought they bored you—the club meetings?"

She smiled discreetly. He had said almost the same thing to her.

"One likes a change now and then; and Mrs. Warren said they'd been interesting lately. I think she mentioned that you had seemed to enjoy them very much."

"And now"—it was his last trump and he played it with dignified emphasis—"how will you get there? I can't leave the house to go with you—"

"Oh," she explained brightly, "that's all arranged. Mrs. Warren has asked her nephew to come for me."

"Who? Robert Warren! I must say, she may think it all right, but I don't care to have you go anywhere with such an escort."

"Why?" she asked calmly.

"Because he's quite objectionable," he stormed. "You know very well he is only accepted socially because of the Warrens."

"He's very agreeable," she said slowly.

"Oh—agreeable!"

"Agreeable people are always nice." She paused a half-second, and then played her highest card. "I think brightness always counts. Take Mrs. Willingham, for instance. One may not approve of her in the least, and yet she's attractive because she's agreeable."

She had scored, and he could only accept the situation. If he did it sulkily she took no notice, and he grew ashamed of his attitude. She had been sweet and gracious about his going; was he to be grossly selfish about her pleasure?

To prove that he was not selfish he brought her some flowers when he came home to dinner the night of the whist club meeting.

"They'll be lovely," she cried gleefully, "with my dress. You know I've a new one for the occasion!"

After dinner, which was more than usually perfect, he had his cigar while she dressed. His enjoyment of this was broken in upon by the arrival of Mrs. Warren's nephew, who, punctual to the minute and quite handsome in his evening clothes, stated easily that he had called for Mrs. Essington, whom he was to have the pleasure of taking to his aunt's card party.

Essington was polite in a forced way. A vision of himself gallantly attentive to Mrs. Willingham swam before his inner eye in a way that controverted any other course. But if he ever wanted to break any one's insufferable neck—!

His wife came in, swift and graceful, with a word of apology to young Warren for her lateness, and of direction for her husband.



AND SHE WENT BACK TO THE TELEPHONE WITH AN INSCRUTABLE SMILE.

"If," she said, standing charmingly poised before the two men, who had risen on her entrance—"if Howard Douglas wakes up and won't go back to sleep, telephone me; if Mr. Warren will be so good"—her tone, merely courteous, seemed to Essington to shade painfully near coquetry as she glanced toward

Warren—"and I will be here instantly." Though she did not sing, her speaking voice was very musical.

Essington went to the door with them. There had been a change of weather and the night for April was sharply cool. He wrapped his wife in her cloak, anticipating the rather eager movement Warren made to be useful, and was careful not to disarrange her beautiful hair. He didn't, of course, expect her to kiss him before that young fool, but there had been something detached, almost casual, in the gaiety of the good-night she threw over her shoulder as she and Warren passed out into the cool darkness together.

He heard their voices as they went down the street floating back in a buoyance of spirit to which his own spirited slam of the hall door seemed the logical echo. It didn't wake the baby, though if prudence had pointed that possibility he couldn't have refrained. He gathered up the law papers he had brought home to study, and went to the bedroom where Howard Douglas slept serenely.

His wife had made everything comfortable for him—his slippers, the cushioned ease of his favorite chair, and if he should tire of his briefs, the latest magazines.

He did tire of the briefs, but instead of reading, lay back in his chair staring at the fire. It seemed to create visions of various sorts, all of them dominated by his wife, as if by a sudden ray of light he was developing long-dormant negatives. In this reverie he saw her as he had first known her—the shy, graceful incarnation of the Daphne spirit of girlhood; later on, nearer and dearer, infinitely more precious, and yet—if because of surety—more lightly prized. A gift of the gods! But daily manna, when it has lost its cloak of miracle, becomes to the unimaginative less a marvelous symbol than a common-place happening.

It was very still in the dainty warmth of the room. When he looked across at the dressing-table his own picture in its silver frame met his frowning gaze. All their married life it had stood there as if on guard, a salient bit of masculinity among the dainty toilet things, the laces and ribbons, all the soft flutter and essence of femininity. If any man ought to be content—

Content? He was content; most utterly so. But the wraith of the question stirred him to anger. It was ridiculous—all because he had gone out two or three times without her. But she hadn't given him this subtle taste of a reprisal through jealousy. He laughed sardonically at the thought that she could be jealous of Mrs. Willingham. It was like putting a tea-rose beside a dahlia to compare the two women.

Even as he rendered her every allegiance, every loyalty, he thought of Warren. Would she compare him with Warren? And to the advantage of whom?

He felt suddenly bitter against heavy odds. Why should he hope, since he had dropped so much of the role of the lover, to seem to her better than other men who were as clever, as well mannered, and far better looking than he? He had juggled with his own possession—now in sudden fear he had clutched at it; would, if he could, shut it selfishly to himself alone. He didn't distrust her, but he distrusted himself—he had opened the way for her to compare him with any commonplace idiot—to any man more brilliant.

His thoughts flowed on in the long retrospect, and one of the strongest seemed to be that he couldn't ever want to hold her through her loyalty alone. To tie one's camel and then commit him to God, seemed a hidebound philosophy to apply to one's wife. She must love him not because she was his wife, but for the woman's reason—old as the eternal feminine.

The hours went by slowly; the people who leased their upper floor grew quiet. He was alone with his thoughts in a desert of silence. It was ridiculous, disproportionate—but he couldn't throw it off—the feeling he was giving to what was, after all, so casual, so slight a thing. Still—

At half past eleven the bell rang, and when he opened the door, he wondered if they saw the signs of his slow analysis on his face.

Warren, at all events, said good-night quickly, and husband and wife were alone in the little hall.

She threw off her cloak and to his eager eyes had never seemed half so beautiful. In the shimmer of her pale grey dress with its touches of green, she seemed to his stirred fancy a beautiful moth flown in from the starlight darkness; the scent of the violets he had given her swept delicately sweet on the warm air of the hall, and the eyes she raised half questioningly to his changed to a depth and sweetness in which a man could drop for the good of his soul.

Essington made a step toward her and held out his arms.

"Dear—" he said.

A week later Mrs. Essington was called to the telephone.

"Mrs. Massey," she said, coming to the door of the sitting-room where Essington, pipe in mouth, sat at ease with a late review, "wants to know if she can count on you for to-morrow night. She didn't think I could leave Howard Douglas, for she'd heard he was teething, but you—"

"Tell her no!" Essington said explosively.

"But she wanted," Mrs. Essington continued to explain, "you to bring Mrs. Willingham—her husband is out of town again."

"Well, I shan't do it," he said flatly. "Tell her to get some one else to run errands—"

"Play knight-errant, you mean, don't you?" Mrs. Essington twinkled. "I might," she mused as she turned to leave the room, "suggest Mr. Warren."

And she went back to the telephone with an inscrutable smile.

Next Week, **RODNEY'S TRIAL** By **ANNIE HAMILTON DONNELL**